

## Finding Intimacy on the Mats and in the Surf

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### Summary:

Based on studies of mixed martial arts and surfing, we argue that an appeal of these physical activities are the intimate and sensual relationships that take place during participation and “downtime” e.g. resting on mats, floating in the sea. Here our participants, men, experience shared vulnerability and emotion. These fleeting instances of care are often missed in emphasizing the traditional performances that dominate sites of masculinity. Yet, these shared intensive moments are important. They are tied to a policing of ‘appropriate’ masculine values and practices but also provide an opening for creative negotiations of new possibilities.

### introduction

1. The bell rang out signaling the end of the final round of sparring—an exhausting combination of striking and grappling. Matt and Chris collapsed simultaneously on the mats. Each soaked in a mix of their two sweats. They made an odd pair—Matt, the young hip urbanite with a trendy haircut and brand-name training gear, recently returned from taking part in the women’s march, and Chris, a self-declared “country boy libertarian” sporting a high buzzcut and a large tattoo of Jesus on the cross that was now visible through his soaked, thin white t-shirt. As they engaged in light stretching while massaging their sore body parts, Chris picked up the downtrodden reflections he had begun prior to sparring, now going deeper into his frustrations with work: “none of them [his employers and co-workers] care about me. They’d like me better if I were actually a machine.” Matt put his hand on Chris’s shoulder, “We care about you...and you are a machine.” The two made eye-contact, smiled, laughed, and continued to converse about the abundance of superficial friendships and the struggle to find meaningful connections outside the MMA gym.

2. Today, ‘the boys’ have been surfing locally. As they sit and bob in the sea the conversation moves to how David has been depressed since the factory shut down and it’s become a struggle for his family. When eye contact with David is lost others notice his head goes down. They feel vulnerable too, they are of the same community. There is a sensitivity fostered by how the emotional lives of the men spill all over each other. A hand reaches over to rustle his hair. A lowered voice reassures him that they’ll all pitch in and go grocery shopping on the way home. The rent will be paid. A wave comes, David catches it, blocking a visiting surfer. Local surfers get priority to waves. The boys hoot

and holler at David, adding to his enjoyment of the wave. Empathy and care is directed toward some bodies rather than others, they do not flow freely.

Combat sports and surfing have long caught the public imaginary. Whether the more celebratory exploration found in best-selling and critically acclaimed works of literature, art, and film including Joyce Carol Oates' *On Boxing*, Chuck Palahniuk and David Fincher's *Fight Club*, and the cult classic *Point Break* or the more critical interrogations found in academic journals, the two practices continue as bastions of "traditional" masculinity. And, while there are clear differences between men exchanging punches, bending joints, and rolling on sweat-covered mats and sun-kissed bodies traveling the coast in search of the perfect wave, both communities rely on hierarchical codes of etiquette and belonging enforced and enacted through physicality and violence.

When discussing our respective studies of mixed martial arts (MMA) and surfing we were struck by another similarity: the messy and intense emotional lives of the men involved. Taken together our respective ethnographic immersions - Kyle spending over five-years taking hits in MMA gyms in the Midwest of the United States, and Clifton spending twenty years examining surfing communities around the world - offer insight into the how these men do modern masculinity as well as new possibilities opened up as they shared the mats and the surf. Contrary to our initial assumptions, practitioners of both activities regularly moved beyond affirmations of the traditionally valued (and celebrated) masculine traits of strength and stoicism to also surrender to a vulnerable emotional intimacy. In fact, emotionally intimate connections serve as a central allure of both practices—a finding that required us to seek out an alternative to dominant sociological approaches to masculinity. In this article we argue for the importance of an approach that better explores masculinity as process that does not pre-frame or determine what may happen as masculinity is done. This processual approach involves detailing reification of dominant practices and values but *also* being more attuned to how these are never settled. Focus also shifts to the momentary ruptures along the way that can potentially undermine those dominant practices and values or even replace them with alternatives, sometimes more 'care-full' but also sometimes more 'harm-full'.

### **models of masculinity**

Sociologists have had a lot to say about men's attraction to sport and the dangers within. Most influential has been the work of Michael Messner and Raewyn Connell. Messner has explored how sport offers a socially-accepted site for boys to learn to be men and for those men to differentiate themselves from women through the unabashed celebration of traditional tropes of toughness and stoicism. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" is used to examine sport's role in the reproduction and reclamation of particular unethical and harm-full iterations of

masculinity e.g. a reification of strength and violence. Her theory is predicated on the insight that masculinity comes in multiple forms with the hegemonic ideal having higher concentrations of the qualities that subordinate and marginalize other versions (as well as women and other sex-gender affiliations).

There is no denying that sports such as MMA and surfing validate and reproduce many hegemonic – sometimes labeled “toxic” – masculine values and practices including violence, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. We witnessed firsthand how this form of “training” (social conditioning) can be further exaggerated in settings occupied almost exclusively by men. As cultural theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, such “homosociality” fundamentally involves a reproduction of heteronormativity by orientating any relationship and desire between men through a third “object” or activity. Surfers and fighters will offer detailed tales of the pursuit of women as they prepare for shared physical exertion. Or they may interfere with any shared physical excitement by directing it through discussions of the effectiveness of a fight technique or a wave ridden. Thus, any potential eroticism of a male-to-male relationship is interrupted and simultaneously homosexual desire is demonized. Through this process, any overt intimacy is managed and policed.

We also found ample evidence for these sites operating as places for men to (re)claim and reproduce hegemonic (/toxic) masculinity. As Matt and Chris, the two men in the introductory vignette, learn to fight, they also provide each other with the affirmation that it is important for men to possess this physical skill and counter the perceived loss of confidence, independent men in wider society. “What if” stories of brawls in bars, inner-cities, and travels abroad entertain and draw in a crowd. Similarly, the beachside carpark is turned into an exclusionary space as men gather and change into and out of wetsuits. They laugh and tease each other as they do so, brazen in their nudity. However, no lingering look is permitted and a woman doing same will often experience the men’s uncomfortable sexual gaze. This public locker room is not meant to be hers, although women surfers are increasingly challenging this arrangement.

More recently, a second model of masculinity has emerged that challenges the idea that homosocial sporting arrangements inherently reproduce hegemonic hierarchies and reject alternative forms of behavior. Most notably, Eric Anderson has argued that there has been an increase in “inclusive masculinity” in some sport settings whereby multiple masculinities harmoniously co-exist. Anderson argues that increasingly young men willingly express intimacy with each other with little concern about opposing homosexuality to validate their own heterosexuality.

While the subject of our paper is a type of inclusivity built on vulnerability and tenderness, we found little acceptance of the celebratory progress towards inclusion that Anderson writes of.

Even when emotions that may be interpreted as acceptance of eroticism between participants are expressed, they tend to be mobilized as a mechanism for exclusion. Momentary transgression of norms may occur but are permissible by the group only if one quickly returns to confirm their adherence to them. Transgression often proceeds through humor, which serves as a popular way to block any erotic potential from "settling in". Further, while both researchers observed participants voice support for gay rights and marriage, and even witnessed direct call outs of homophobia in the respective communities, the unwritten and unmentioned codes remain entrenched. These rules, when broken and not reinstated, will lead to rejection, othering, and even violence.

Our research also offers some support for the "hybrid" masculinity model recently popularized by Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe that avoids any clearly delineated typologies or forms. Instead, this third way forward emphasizes how multiple masculinities can be performed by the same individual depending on the circumstance, and, there is contextual flexibility to embody less dominant variations. While this sounds like some real progress, let's not celebrate yet. Even though there is movement it is men who have the most of what Raewyn Connell (recall model one) calls "patriarchal privilege" that get to do so. Different men have differing access to resources and "permissions" to embody and even play with alternative variations that could be read as taboo. Those positioned most closely to hegemonic traits (e.g. being white, affluent, heteronormative, identified as male at birth) get more choice and flexibility. Such choice and flexibility remains more restricted for others.

We have found value in paying attention to patriarchal privileges to understand the shifts in doing masculinity. It is true that the overtly traditional masculine aesthetic of surfing and fighting accrue provide the "gender capital," to use Bridges term, to allow softer performances like group discussions of fashion choices, grooming technique, body care, comforting touch, personal relationships, and self-doubt. However, when paying attention to the emotional and physical connections on the mats and in the surf, we observed unexpected movement and flexibility when it comes to doing masculinity. We paused, caught off-guard. There was a bit more to the story.

### **ruptures and style**

Our respective ethnographies pushed us to go further into how shared moments of intensity were creating the intimate and sensual connections that are central to homosociality, and in turn can result in toxic values/practices *and* progressive and inclusive beliefs/effects. We witnessed dynamic messy realities that resisted any straight-forward analytical determination as hegemonic or inclusive. A language of models, varieties, and types simply became too structural to register the ongoing fluctuations and unexpected outcomes that occurred. Instead, we worked toward

articulating experiences of masculinity in a way that could better demonstrate the immense ongoing variety of inter and intra-actions that take place as masculinity is *done*.

We began to refer to masculinity through a language of style to connote how arrangements are always in process, involving an open-ended adaptation to contingent situations and contexts. We are not confronted with perfectly set patterns because material, spatial, economic, cultural, and social elements are always coming together and breaking apart. Doing masculinity for these men involves a highly-tuned sensitivity to this movement. In training alongside and engaging in dialogue with our participants, they drew attention to how often what they did was guided by not simply the cognitive but the felt. They would experience a rush of blood to the face or the hair rising on the back of the neck. As they became conscious of this they employed social and cultural discourses to sort out and qualify what they were feeling—does this flushing of the face equate to embarrassment, shame, anger, disgust? How then to behave? It is not possible to follow a script that would imply any straightforward repetition. Rather, style is a modulation in situ, infused with a necessary creativity. We believe that understanding masculinity as style has political potential as it emphasizes the felt ongoing production of difference as well as the potential to do things differently.

This is not to say there is no larger social organization of masculinity. However, we understand masculinity as a process of blocking, containing, and closing off creative possibilities. This is the continuity of certain practices and values, albeit adapted to the current circumstance. The dynamism that our participants experienced as they were caught up in contextual and contingent moments shifted our attention away from trying to identify hegemonic masculinity or other typologies. Instead we were guided by the codes of the wave or the fight, which are fluid, transformable, and always on the edge of collapse. The effect was an undermining of any certainty as to how masculinity should or should not be done, what practices would or should mean in different contexts, and indeed where things would go next. Rather than ask what is good/bad masculinity or what type of masculinity is this (or not), new questions now came to the fore: What blocks possibilities? What enhances potential? What increases the power to act and connect? What diminishes, contains, or restrains?

If a boy is hanging out after displaying skill to a cohort of working-class surfers who he admires, he may get a pat on the back or catch their approving eye. This moment of intimacy charges his nervous system. His eyes light up, face flushes, and he gets a shiver down his spine. The touch can make the boy feel like he just got a knighthood. He qualifies the affective interaction via his social context as the emotion of joy (or in surfing terms: stoke). However, he steps away from this cohort for a moment and crosses paths with tourists who marginalize and even denigrate his social class. The denigration also induces a flush of the face and a tingling of the spine. This time they are deciphered according to social learning as shame. In turn, that shame may transform into

an “irrational” anger and hardened exterior. Our sensual life is never entirely under our control. Many contextual conditions play out and the boy must ride the waves, adapting to the shifting conditions as he does so. No two waves (situations) are the same, and each one is itself fluid. Masculinity as style is registered on and fueled by an affective and emotional spectrum.

In the gym a training partner provides help by placing the dental guard in a mouth or strapping a groin protecting belt around the waist after noticing the fumbling attempts from the gloved hands of someone about to spar. These caring touches briefly interrupt the jittery isolation of self-doubt. The attempt to project the “appropriate” stoic confidence returns after a quick acknowledging laugh. Post-sparring the openings and connections are more apparent as the men exchange hugs, smiles plastered on their bloodied faces, words pouring out before mouth guard is removed or sentences fully formulated. The shared intensity temporarily breaks open the cold façade of masculinity, allowing exploratory dialogue at both the felt and verbal level.

### **Studying the sidelines**

So what are the takeaways from our respective ethnographies and our shift in theoretical orientation? The first is a methodological lesson. Popular depictions and academic studies of men, masculinity, and sport tend to focus on the moments of peak involvement and intensity of participation – the *action*. There is a tendency to marginalize the mundane. The hours of driving, carrying gear along the beach, suiting up, watching the sea, and paddling out to mostly bob up and down staring at the horizon before catching a wave. Or the MMA hobbyist spending hours drilling a particular submission chain, holding pads while a partner works through a challenging striking combination, and entertaining with stories while recovering enough to go another round.

We found that in the atmospheres of the banal and mundane the emotional life of men leads to much slippage when it comes to how one does or does not do masculinity, as well as what is “acceptable” or not. It is during such “downtime” -- the sitting on the mats post-fight, covered in the salty residue of shared sweat, or the staring at the horizon post-surf, covered in the salty residue of shared ocean—that participants explore the openings brought by exchanging blows and submissions or through sharing the fun of catching a wave. There is vulnerability in these fleeting moments as the men attempt to make sense of what just happened, ask difficult questions, and share issues that previously were kept private. These are the moments of intimacy and connection that participants refer to when stating that they *know* their fellow surfers and fighters in a way they do not know others.

Let us again consider the fighters Matt and Chris. Identifying their “type” of masculinity would be markedly different with only a slight shift in attention. Ten-minutes prior to the opening vignette, Chris responded to receiving a clean punch from Matt by moving his lips into a

formation somewhere between snarl and smile, shaking his head to indicate he wasn't hurt, and then pouring on a barrage of punches until Chris, trapped against the mat-covered wall, had no choice but to clinch and hold tight until the timer saved him. Much scholarly analysis would emphasize the hardened shell the men had constructed to maximize their ability to absorb, deny, and inflict pain in an apparently violent manner. And, just slightly before the aggressive sparring, the two reveled in the re-telling of a gym member's late night drunken conflict at a local diner, effectively establishing the importance of men always being ready for a fight. Yet, by the end of the training session, the mats facilitated comfort and care as the two shared a restful moment and reassured each other of their bond—a connection lost through a methodological insistence on the moments of high intensity.

To be fair, in our own experience, it is a lot of fun (and more than a bit self-congratulatory) to detail masterfully overcoming opponents and waves. However, the marginalizing of the mundane equates to a vast constellation of experiences of masculinity being relegated to the “sidelines” and results in an incomplete documentation and analysis of men's lives in and through sport. In particular, this focus effectively gets in the way of attuning to the movement and creativity that could ignite the alternative meanings and doings of masculinity, which leads to our final point.

### **fragile possibilities**

Masculinity *is* fragile. Although the statement is often used pejoratively, especially in hashtagform (#masculinitysofragile), we suggest this is no bad thing but rather something to celebrate as a point of intervention. It is vulnerability - an openness and attunement to the emotional life of men - that will offer fresh insights into how masculinity is stylish. There is always the potential for the new or out-of-the-ordinary to occur, even as many of these potentials are effectively rounded up, captured, and blocked. Our research demanded from us, and calls for others, to avoid beginning with and ending with the premise that men are simply alienated from their emotional selves. In fact, they are highly sensitive to movement and this underlines masculinity as style. That is, an ongoing creative adaptation to instability, being incomplete, and change.

This is not to say that that any political potential will necessarily be realized (often the opposite is true!), but there is certainly hope. We found that by working harder to acknowledge the care-full negotiations in these at times toxic sites, research participants would notice and let their guard down. The result was some participants engaging in self-introspection that led to discussions of other possibilities for understanding and doing masculinity, supported by a reassurance that there is already evidence of them being capable of such.

We argue that approaching masculinity as style can reveal new avenues of exploration that are hidden by dominant models of scholarship. It is by laying bare the everyday dynamism of masculinity that we can undermine understandings of, the organizing of, and assumptions that block change.

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